

# PUBLIC HEALTH OVERVIEW AND FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

## *What is Public Health?*

Public health has been described as what we, as a society, do together to assure the conditions in which people can be healthy. In a word, public health is all about prevention. Historically, public health activities--like water quality control, immunizations and food inspections-- can account for many of the improvements in the health and quality of life by the American people. Public health is "public" because it is concerned with society as a whole and optimal health for the entire community.

Local governments, in cooperation with federal and state governments, have a legal responsibility for the protection and promotion of the community's health. A governmental presence at the local level is necessary to (1) ensure health concerns are identified and monitored, (2) mobilize resources to correct problems, and (3) assure that crucial services are received.

## *Why a Public Health District?*

Meeting the public health needs of today's communities in the face of escalating costs and limited resources is a problem of growing concern for many Connecticut communities. Strained municipal budgets have made fulfilling State public health mandates and offering needed services at a reasonable cost an ever increasing challenge.

But providing comprehensive local public health services does not require that every Connecticut town maintain a full-time, fully staffed, municipal health department. Almost half of Connecticut's towns, motivated by a desire to improve or maintain services while controlling costs, have chosen to provide local public health services to their residents through public health districts. Public health districts are a voluntary, regional approach to delivering local public health services. Almost thirty years of experience has proven that Connecticut communities are able to provide more services for less cost by forming a public health district.

## *What is a Public Health District?*

A public health district is a regional health department formed by two or more communities. It is a separate entity from the towns it serves. Health districts are governed by a District Board of Health, appointed by the legislative bodies of member towns.

Health districts provide "core" functions that lay the groundwork for healthy communities. They assess health problems, develop appropriate policy responses and assure that health problems are effectively addressed. Public health districts provide some public health services directly, and make certain that other services are provided by others in such a way that the quality and outcomes are acceptable.

Health district services are tailored to meet the specific needs of the communities being served. They can offer more service than a part-time health department and save member towns money through improved efficiency and coordination. Full-time staff also have the resources for health planning--a method proven to avoid the high costs of responding to crises. Plus, health districts are eligible for state and federal funding.

## *Why Should Your Community Belong to a Health District?*

- ◆ A professionally staffed department with fully trained and certified personnel.
- ◆ Improved availability of services: seven days a week, 24 hours a day for emergencies.
- ◆ Less fragmentation of services.
- ◆ Uniform enforcement of state laws and regulations, codes and ordinances.
- ◆ A regional approach to public health problems that cross town lines.
- ◆ Pooling of manpower for back-up services in times of need.
- ◆ The capability to address a wider scope of public health services and issues than your community could on its own.
- ◆ Reduction of waste and maximized effectiveness through problem identification, priority setting, improved coordination and more efficient use of resources.
- ◆ Eligibility for extensive state and federal funding, bringing to the local level dollars that might not otherwise be possible.

Many of the concerns expressed by communities considering a health district involve the issue of local control. Connecticut communities value local autonomy, and worry that they will lose their control over local public health issues when they become part of a district. While belonging to a district does result in some loss of direct local control, it is important to remember that a public health district is controlled by a governing board that in turn is controlled by the district's towns. Loss of local autonomy is actually more likely to occur when a town fails to invest in public health measures and a crisis develops, leaving the state no alternative but to step in and take control of the situation.

## *What are the Options for Towns that Want to Join a District?*

Towns have two options. One is to look into joining an existing public health district. The other is to form a new health district. In either case, a community's first step is to assess its present public health system. If your town is considering becoming a member of an established district, the assessment will allow both your town and the district's board to see if there is a "good fit" between your community's needs and the district's programs and services. And if your town is thinking about forming a new district, the assessment will provide the basis for designing the district's programs, services and budget. Most of all, a community can be confident that informed choices have been made.

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## Questions and Answers on Health Districts

*Q What is a public health district?*

*A A public health district is a regional health department formed by two or more municipalities to provide full-time professional public health services to residents of member towns.*

*Q How does a public health district operate?*

*A A public health district is a separate entity from the member towns and is governed through a Board of Directors appointed by the legislative bodies of the member towns. The board has fiduciary responsibility for the health district. It assures that the health district's mission is carried out, sets policy and program, establishes an annual budget, and appoints and hires a Director of Public Health to manage the health district and its program.*

The size of the Board of Health is related to the population of the member towns. One representative is appointed from each municipality in the district. If a municipality has a population over 10,000 inhabitants, it has additional representation--one representative for each ten thousand population, or part thereof. However, no municipality may have more than 5 representatives on a district board (Section 19a-246 of the Connecticut General Statutes).

*Q How is the decision made to join or form a public health district?*

*A Each municipality interested in creating or joining a public health district should establish a study committee to examine the current status of public health services in the community, and the merits of creating a new and/or joining an existing health district. This committee should include interested community members and at least one elected official. Once a proposal is developed, each municipality must, by law, hold a public hearing to obtain public input on joining a district. A vote by the local legislative body must be taken to join a district.*

*Q Is there any financial assistance available from the state?*

*A Yes. Currently, for towns whose population is under 5000, the district receives \$1.78 per capita. For towns with a population over 5000, the district receives \$1.52 per capita.*

*Q What are the requirements for receiving state funding?*

*A The public health district must employ a full time, qualified Director of Health. The district's Board of Directors must prepare and submit for public hearing an annual budget. This budget must include at least \$1.00 per capita of local tax revenues and be presented at a public hearing prior to board approval. The district must submit a plan for providing public health services and a budget for use of*

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state grant monies for approval by the Commissioner of the Connecticut State Department of Public Health.

Public health districts must also assure that the following services are available in each member town:

1. Public health statistics/health planning
2. Communicable and chronic disease control
3. Health education
4. Environmental health services
5. Community nursing services
6. Nutrition services
7. Maternal and child health services
8. Emergency medical services/emergency preparedness

*Q What are the qualifications for a full-time Director of Health?*

*A* The Director of Health must be an individual with experience in public health administration and hold a graduate degree in Public Health from an accredited program of public health. The Health Director is appointed by the Board of Health of the district, with the approval of the Commissioner of Public Health (Section 19a-244 of the Connecticut General Statutes).

*Q What happens to the employees of a municipal health department when that municipality joins a district health department?*

*A* 1. The Director of Health appointment is terminated in each member town (Section 19a-242 of the Connecticut General Statutes).

2. Full-time employees of a municipal health department become employees of the district, but may continue to participate and retain their rights and benefits in the municipal pension system without interruption until their retirement (Section 19a-244 of the Connecticut General Statutes).

*Q Can a town withdraw from the district if it so desires?*

*A* Yes, a town can withdraw by voting to do so, providing it has been a member of the district for at least 24 months prior to such vote of withdrawal (Section 19a-246). The town must give the district notice of its intent prior to January 1. Withdrawal would occur July 1.

*Q What laws govern district departments of health?*

*A* The laws that govern district departments of health in Connecticut are found in the General Statutes of the State of Connecticut. Copies of the General Statutes are usually available at municipal office buildings and state and town libraries.

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Most of the legislation concerning district departments of health is embodied in Chapter 368 of the Connecticut General Statutes, (Section 19a-240 through 19a-246), entitled *District Departments of Health*.

*Q At the present time, how many district departments of health are in operation in Connecticut?*

*A* As of December 1995<sup>\*</sup>, Connecticut had sixteen health districts. The first health district in Connecticut was established nearly thirty years ago. More than one million state residents, just over one third of the state's population, are currently being served by a public health district, covering 79 towns and four boroughs.

Number of member towns per district: ranges from 2 to 13

Size of member towns: varies from under 1,000 to over 60,000

Total population served per district: varies from 11,000 to 120,000

Operating budgets: from under \$100,000 to over \$1 million

Size of Governing Boards: varies from 3 members to 20 members

*Q Where may I obtain additional information regarding the formation, administration, services, cost or other related aspects of district health departments?*

*A* If you would like more information on health districts and local public health, contact the Local Health Administration Program of the Connecticut State Department of Public Health, 410 Capitol Avenue-MS# 11LOC, P.O. Box 340308, Hartford, CT. 06134-0308. Phone (860) 509-7660.

*\*Current statistics are: As of July 2006 CT has 20*